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Publish or Perish

Theo Bögels, Vrije Universiteit

My title is perhaps misleading. One might be inclined to think that I will be discussing the present-day academic rat race, whereas it is my intention to take you back to the publishing world of the early seventeenth century in the Dutch republic, especially in its contacts with the academic world. I am particularly interested in the relation that existed between the author and his publisher, because that relation is decisive in the process which determines which texts will be published and divulged.

The process of decisions to be taken before a manuscript reached its prospective readers in the shape of a printed book is not altogether clear. It would seem that, in a period when writing for money was not seen as an acceptable professional pursuit for the literate intellectual and academic social class, publishers could not, as a rule, commission the production of a text from members of this class. They would often, though not always, depend on the initiative of the author, who would look for a suitable publisher. Most academic communities were fairly small, so personal acquaintance and sympathy would play a role when the choice of a publisher was made. This choice would also be influenced by the status the publisher had in the republic of letters, and by the kind of contract he could offer. On the other

hand, the booktrade protected itself effectively against intrusion from outside: the publishers' monopoly on distribution discouraged publications at an author's own expense. Moreover, authors were powerless against the widespread practice of piracy of successful books. The rat race existed then as well, but was of a different kind.

Copyright, in the modern sense of the word, did not exist. An author or a publisher could be granted a privilege against piracy, but the particularistic structure of the Dutch Republic made it impossible to enforce such a privilege. Copying a successful text or a successful author was therefore an attractive option open to publishers who wanted to make quick and easy money. This was done repeatedly and openly, and with much greater regard for the publisher's own interest than the author's. If a publisher obtained an as yet unpublished text in manuscript form, especially by a well-known author, he would have no scruples about its publication. Leiden's university printer, Jan Paedts, published in 1612 without the author's consent a collection of poems by Roemer Visscher under the title of *T'Loff van de Mutse, ende van een Blaeuw Scheen...* because as the publisher stated in his preface,

during the recent dog days and the heat as is the custom, teaching had ceased at our Leiden Academy, and with the lessons of the professors the exercises of the students had stopped; and because of that my printing presses almost came to a halt as well and stopped creaking as actively as at other times: therefore, so as not to be idle, I took this work

to hand, considering that half an egg is better than an empty shell¹

A text by a popular author almost guaranteed its publisher a good profit. There was little the author could do to prevent an unauthorised publication. In the preface to Gerbrand Adriaensz. Bredero's fourth and later editions of his poetry collection entitled *Geestigh Liedt-Boecxke*,² the author wrote that he had written these poems to entertain his friends and that he had never intended to have them printed, since 'I thought there was enough capriciousness and printing in the world'. One of his friends, however, had diligently collected these poems and

they were for the first time printed by *Govert Basson* at Leiden, who distributed and sold them in such an unbelievably short period of time, and was so miserly, that I was not allowed to have one copy to have my material reprinted.³

As in the case of Paedts, money seems to have been Basson's main motive for this publication, but, in view of Bredero's wish to obtain a copy, it seems as if Basson at least faithfully represented the author's original work. Matters could be far worse, for Bredero continues:

it is for the second time printed by some people without my knowledge at Amsterdam together with some dishonest and lecherous songs that are attributed to me, but the honour

they did to me and the gratitude I owe them because of this, I shall have occasion to repay them with a friendship they will remember for a long time.⁴

Bredero used the only weapon that stood at the disposal of an author who had been wronged by a publisher: name and shame, a verbal pillory. And there is poetic justice in this story: none of these pirated copies has survived.

The absence of copyright sometimes made it possible for publishers to walk off with the money normally due to the author as well. They would add to their profit whatever reward an author would get for his text. Once an author died, his spiritual inheritance would become even more easily marketable than during his lifetime. Dominicus Baudius was professor of history at Leiden, but in his day mainly known because of his excessive drinking habits: he was even suspended from teaching in 1612 'because of his dishonourable way of life' (Molhuysen, 43). He was also a well-known Neolatin poet. In 1607 his *Poemata* had been published, with a dedication to the States General. Baudius even offered a copy personally to king James, but he did not receive the customary remuneration, because the English king refused to reward him for a book dedicated to the Dutch High and Mighty Lords. The king's proud attitude was, however, amply compensated by the generous sum of 300 guilders the States General gave him (Grootens, 151). Baudius had obviously been given presentation copies by his publisher, but after his death this obligation vanished, whereas the interest in his books increased. The same publisher brought his correspondence on

the market, an edition so successful that it was immediately reprinted in an expanded edition. His *Poemata* were also reprinted, but this time the publisher dedicated the book to the States General, with a gift of ten copies. He received 50 guilders as a reward, far less than the author had received, but nevertheless a worthwhile bonus.

Usually the initiative for a new publication depended on the author, who would try to find a suitable publisher to divulge his message. In a university town like Leiden many of these authors would be somehow connected with the university. Although the contracts with the professors did not stipulate that they had to publish (and some also did not have any teaching obligations either!), many of them had a considerable list of publications. The university showed in its appointments policy that it was very much aware of the fact that the status of scholars of international reputation rubbed off on the institution with which they were connected. Publications that would add to the prestige of the university were therefore certainly encouraged. Sometimes this was done by a reduction in teaching load or by publication at the university's expense, but the more usual stimulus was money, and they were not inconsiderable sums if the author had the good sense to dedicate his publication to the university.

Authors, and especially academic ones, liked to give the impression that it was more important to be published than to gain financially from their publications. However, individual books dedicated to civic authorities could obtain monetary reward for its author, and no academic left that opportunity unused if the possibility was offered. When Everard Bronchorst, professor of

law, had his *Commentarius ad Regulis Juris* published by the Elzeviers on 11 March 1624, he sent copies to the States of Holland and several cities in the province. Already on 18 March he could note with great satisfaction in his diary that the States of Holland sent him 50 Carolus guilders, to be followed on 23 March by 100 guilders from Dordrecht. On 25 March he received 50 guilders from Delft. Leiden presented him with 100 guilders on the last day of March, Gouda gave him 48 guilders on 23 April and, finally, on 2 May, 80 guilders arrived from Haarlem (*Diarium*, 182-3). The total sum amounted to 428 guilders. His annual salary at this point in his career was 800 guilders, so the book yielded him more than half his annual income within two months.

In order to be able to dedicate all these copies to the various authorities, the author first had to obtain the copies. Often a negotiable number of free copies was the only fee a publisher was willing to pay. It then depended entirely on the commercial instinct and the social network of the author whether he made any money out of his writing. Bronchorst, the Leiden professor of law, may serve as an example here. Bronchorst made notes of his contracts in his *Diarium*, and is therefore a valuable source of information on the relationship between author and publisher. In November 1612 he gave the manuscript of his *Methodus Feudorum* to the Leiden publisher Jacob Marcus and ‘agreed that he would give me for my book 25 bound copies and the same number of unbound copies instead of an honorarium’ (128). Four months later Marcus’ servant presented him with 80 bound and 20 unbound copies (132). In view of the publisher’s generosity it is not surprising that Bronchorst’s next book should also have

been published by Marcus, but this time things did not go smoothly. It was a reprint, which may be the reason why the author only received 25 copies, even though the reprint was vastly augmented. When it took Marcus longer than expected to deliver they agreed that Bronchorst would receive 5 copies extra in compensation (155). His next book, which was the book I discussed above and which yielded him more than half his annual salary, was not published by Marcus but by Bonaventura Elzevier, probably because Elzevier made him a better offer. Bronchorst wrote in his diary: 'I agreed with the bookseller Bonaventure Elzevier that he would execute my *Commentarium ad Regulis Juris*, and we arranged that he would give me 50 copies; that, if I wanted more, I would buy them for the same price as the booksellers who acquired them from him' (180). Apart from the 50 copies which Bronchorst received free, he bought 63 copies at the price of 13 *stuivers* each. The sum of 428 guilders he received as a reward for all his dedications therefore only demanded an investment of a mere fl. 40.95. The number of 113 copies which Bronchorst needed, shows how many people perhaps expected to receive a presentation copy from the author. He might sell them but that would go against the unwritten rule that writing for money was not fitting an academic's lofty status. Besides the civic authorities who patronised the publication, the author would also send copies to his academic colleagues in Leiden and at other universities in order to enhance his academic reputation. For a successful academic author like Bronchorst, therefore, to publish was in every respect a profitable business.

It seems then that dedications in the free copies an author was given by his publisher were an accepted means by which an author could earn money without having to admit that this was at least one of his motives for writing. Caspar Barlaeus, professor of logic at Leiden university, lost his job during the religious and political conflict of 1618-19, because he had supported the faction that had lost. He had therefore to find other means to support himself and his family. He worked on translations, but commissions were hard to come by. Barlaeus was a renowned Neolatin poet and was friends with Constantijn Huygens, the personal secretary of the Princes of Orange and himself also a poet, albeit mainly in Dutch. On several occasions that could give rise to patriotic emotions, Barlaeus gave expression to these sentiments in Latin poems. When prince Maurice died in 1625, he wrote *Manes Auriaci*, in which he described the deceased prince as a war hero, carefully omitting any reference to his role in the conflict which had cost the poet his job. Barlaeus sent Huygens a few copies of the poem, with the express wish to give one to his master, but cautiously adding that he wanted to avoid all appearance of great financial need. A few months later he addressed Prince Fredrik Henry directly in a poem, celebrating his appointment as Stadholder. Again he asked Huygens to give a copy to the prince, once more emphasising that he 'solicited neither honour nor reward'.⁵ Huygens, however, well understood Barlaeus' true situation, for he repeatedly assured the poet that he had not forgotten his friend's interest, but the fact that the prince hardly knew any Latin did not make matters easier for him (*Briefwisseling*, I, 194 and 195). On Christmas eve Barlaeus' wife

‘was showered with a rain of gold’ (Alma, 37) from the prince, and a grateful Barlaeus immediately informed his friend at court.

Barlaeus did not limit himself to the national scene in his quest for monetary support. After the accession of Charles I to the English throne he wrote a long poem, *Brittannia Triumphans*, in praise of the new king. Huygens used his diplomatic channels to make sure that the king was to receive the book. When Barlaeus showed Huygens the letters with which his present to the king was to be accompanied, his friend typically suggested that he should emphasise his lofty situation as a poet: ‘make it appear as if you consider a poet too great to accept presents, but not great enough to refuse those of a king’ (*Briefwisseling*, I, 202-3). Barlaeus was to wait for more than a year, but when Dudley Carlton, the English ambassador in The Hague, returned from a visit to London in 1627 he carried with him a little chest and a gold chain as tokens of the king’s appreciation (*Briefwisseling*, I, 217). The book is now in the holdings of the British Library.

Barlaeus also wrote a large number of occasional poems, for weddings, funerals and academic occasions. That he did this out of financial necessity becomes clear from the fact that the stream of poems came to an almost abrupt halt when he was appointed professor at the newly founded Athenaeum Illustre at Amsterdam in 1630.

Before a publisher would agree to include a book in his list, some sort of agreement between him and his author had to be reached. The honorarium an author could ask of a publisher had always posed a problem. An early example is found in a letter from the cartographer Ortelius to the historian Emanuel van

Meteren, dated 17 November 1586 (342). Van Meteren had rather optimistically asked Ortelius what remuneration he could expect of his publisher for the publication of his *Memoriën*. Ortelius wrote back that it was usually the other way round and he gave a number of examples where the publisher Plantin was paid considerable sums by authors for the publication of their works, and added that authors were usually charged extra for the illustrations as well. The only arrangement he knew of by which authors were paid, was by receiving free copies of their work, the number of which seemed to depend entirely on the generosity of the publisher. Ortelius added that the highest number of copies he had known an author to receive was 100, but that he himself had been very grateful when Plantin sent him 25 copies to his home. When Van Meteren inquired about the possibility of publishing the book at his own expense, Ortelius strongly advised him against it. He wrote that one had to have a lot of ready money, which might well be lost if the book was unsuccessful. Success, on the other hand, could also mean that the investment would be lost, because the book would be copied immediately and the booksellers would sell only the copied version to spite the author for trying to sell the original by himself in the first place. Ortelius therefore concluded that the booktrade protected itself very well against intruders and ended the letter lamenting that he ‘who wished to deal with books, must be a bookseller’ (423).⁶

Hugo Grotius had a similar experience, although in his case with a happier ending. Grotius had been banished from the Dutch Republic for his role in the conflict which had also cost Barlaeus his job. When he finally arrived in Paris, he completed

the manuscript of his famous work *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*. Since he and his wife Maria van Reigersbergh were chronically short of money, they tried to gain as much as possible with its publication. When his wife visited Rotterdam she talked to a bookseller whom they knew from their Rotterdam days. He advised them to buy a printing press and type and to publish the book themselves. They would, he said, make a profit of approximately 2,000 guilders. Full of enthusiasm Maria van Reigersbergh asked her husband to write to her what type he wished to acquire, what kind of paper should be used and what the size of the book was to be. A few weeks later, however, her enthusiasm had cooled after she had spoken to Erpenius, the Leiden professor of oriental languages, who owned an oriental printing office himself and therefore had experience in publishing at his own expense. Erpenius told her that profit could be made but that 'it all comes down to distribution and that it is extremely difficult to get cash from booksellers' (94-5).⁷ Finally she reached an agreement with Leiden booksellers who were sympathetic to her husband's difficulties. They agreed that Grotius should have the book printed by Buon, a publisher in Paris. Grotius was to demand at least 100 free copies which he then should send to Leiden and the Leiden booksellers would take care of the distribution. Buon, however, only wanted to sell the book in France, and left it to his Dutch colleagues to sell the books elsewhere. It seems that in this case, for once, the booksellers did not live up to their miserly reputation.

Authors clearly depended completely on their publishers, who held the monopoly on the ways a book could be distributed.

They were also not helped by the tradition that a man of letters did not sell his works, even though he might find himself in a situation where he had to publish so as not to perish. It was possible to live by the pen, and money could only be made through patronage, by dedicating the free copies publishers might give to academic or civic authorities. And it seems that only professors were really successful at this game.

Notes

1. 'deze laetst verlopen heete Hondtsdaghen, nae ouder ghewoonte, in onse Leydsche Academie niet gheleert en werde, ende met der Professoren lessen oock der Studenten oeffeninghen op hielden: ende mijn Druck persen dieshalven nae stil stonden, en so seer niet en craeckten als wel op ander tijden: Soo heb ick, om niet leech te sitten, dit werck ter handt ghenomen, denckende dat betere een halff ey was dan een leeghen dop.' See Roemer Visscher, [iii].

2. For a detailed discussion of the editions of this book, see Bögels, 86-88.

3. '...en syn by *Govert Basson* tot Leyden ten eerstemael gedruckt, die deselvige in een heel seltsame en ongelóófljcke kortheyt van tijt versonden en verkocht heeft, en is in sulcker voegen begeert gheweest, dat ick selver gheen exemplaer en heb mogen behouwen, om het de een of d'ander reys te doen herdrucken'. See Bredero, [ix].

4. 'Doch is het ten tweede male t'Amsterdam van eenige Gesellens sonder mijn weten ghedruckt met sommige on-eerlijcke en ontuchtighe Liedekens die al op mijnen naam lopen, maar de eer die my daer mede geschiet is, en de danckbaarheyt die ick haar hier over schuldig ben, sal ick haar ter gelegeheyt met een vriendtschap vergeldê, die haar heugen sal'. See Bredero, [ix].

5. 'Nec honores preno, nec praemia aucupor'. See *Briefwisseling Huygens*, I, 193.

6. 'Wie met boecken om wil gaen, moet een boeckvercooper sijn.' See *Ortelii Epistolae*, 423.

7. 'Het komt allemaal aen op het distribuieren ende datter qualyck geldt wt de bouckverkoopers handen te crigen is'. See *Brieven Maria van Reigersberch*, 94-5.

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